Crocs rock at riding the waves

London

Crocodiles “surf” waves to cross many kilometres of ocean, scientists have learned.

The discovery explains how the estuarine crocodile – the world's largest living reptile – came to colonise numerous South Pacific islands separated by huge stretches of water.

It may also account for reports of large crocodiles being sighted far out to sea.

The formidable estuarine or salt-water crocodile, whose habitat extends over more than 10,000 sq km of the south-east Pacific, lives mainly in rivers, mangrove swamps and estuaries.

Salt-water crocs can grow up to 6 m and have been known to attack and kill humans.

Scientists have long wondered how estuarine crocodiles manage to travel so far when they are poor swimmers.

The answer, according to findings reported yesterday in the Journal of Animal Ecology, is that they surf.

Australian researchers tagged 27 adult crocodiles with sonar transmitters and tracked their movements over the course of a year.

The scientists found that both male and female crocodiles undertook long-distance journeys, often travelling more than 50 km from their river homes to the open sea.

Among the team was the late crocodile hunter Steve Irwin.

The evidence showed that, like surfers catching waves, the crocodiles rode the ocean currents to cross large areas of open sea.

One 3.8 m male travelled 590 km in 25 days, timing its journey to coincide with seasonal currents.

A second, measuring almost 5 m, covered more than 411 km in 20 days, also utilising fast-moving ocean currents.

Hamish Campbell, from the University of Queensland, said, “The estuarine crocodile occurs as island populations throughout the Indian and Pacific ocean, and because they are the only species of salt-water living crocodile to exist across this vast area, regular mixing between the island populations probably occurs.”

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